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ABSTRACT

The number of non-Catholic students in Roman Catholic elementary and secondary schools is growing at both the national and local levels. In the school system of the Archdiocese of Omaha (Nebraska), the largest number of non-Catholic students come from mostly poor and black families in inner-city or changing neighborhoods. Other non-Catholics are enrolled in "middle class" or "elite" Catholic schools. Talks with educators and parents in the Omaha Catholic school system indicate that non-Catholic parents choose Catholic schools because they perceive them to respect students and to emphasize learning and moral values. In turn the Catholic schools expect non-Catholic students and parents to participate in school activities. This situation offers potentials for evangelization. However, non-Catholic admissions may be eroded if Catholic schools do not express clearly and unequivocally their function in the Catholic Church's educational mission, do not seek all resources for students with special needs, and do not publicize the true costs and value of a Catholic school education. Catholic schools have legitimate and educationally sound reasons to try to attract non-Catholic students and should insist on parents' rights to choose the schools they want. (Author/RW)

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NON-CATHOLICS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: A CHALLENGE TO EVANGELIZATION

Catholic schools have been more blamed than praised for the presence of non-Catholic students in classrooms. Blame is attached to Catholic schools for taking only the "elite" thus leaving the "less elite" to public schools. Blame has been attached also, for taking the "white" thus presumably leaving black and other minorities for that paragon of virtuous democracy, the public school!

Is this truth or myth?

In 1978 approximately 9% of the 3,218,000 students enrolled (289,620 students in Catholic Schools in the United States were non-Catholics. CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN AMERICA, NCEA/Ganley, 1979, Fisher Publishing Company, p. xvi.) Though relatively small, this percentage represents a significant increase over 1970-71 in which an estimated 5% of Catholic school enrollments were non-Catholic.

The importance of the growing number of non-Catholics parents who choose Catholic schools cannot be underestimated. It means that some one, Catholic or non-Catholic, is investing nearly \$300 million in Catholic schools (computed at approximately \$1,000.00 per capita cost) solely for costs of educating non-Catholics.

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National research has not focused to a great extent on non-Catholics in Catholic schools. So for the purposes of this presentation I shall confine my observations to information which I have gleaned in the Archdiocese of Omaha Catholic Schools. Then, I shall attempt to focus on general concerns and positive recommendations relative to the issues.

In the Archdiocese of Omaha non-Catholics are represented almost exclusively in the metropolitan area. In this respect, I believe Omaha is typical of other large northern cities. However, I suspect that in the south non-Catholics are well-represented in rural areas as well.

Three mainstreams of non-Catholic students may be identified in the Archdiocese of Omaha's 37 grade schools and 12 high schools in metropolitan Omaha. These are: 1) the non-Catholic enrolled in "inner-city" or changing neighborhood schools, the majority of whom are Black; 2) the non-Catholic enrolled in the "middle class" parochial school generally serving a blue and white-collar or middle management Catholics, of whom the great majority are white students; and 3) the non-Catholic enrolled in an "elite" school serving a clientele which is reasonably affluent and greatly values strong, academic education.

The largest number of non-Catholic students, by far, are those whose families live in inner-city or changing neighborhoods. Of these the majority are Black, and likely to be poor. Of significance also is that these students are likely to be low achievers who experience serious and

continuing academic problems. (N.B. Data from several sources establishes that Black families are more likely to experience poverty than non-minority families. Further, there is a high correlation between extreme poverty and low achievement, as witnessed by the enormous expenditures provided by Title I (ESEA) programs.) Data from our schools supports this generalization.)

Certain "elite" Catholic schools appear to attract successive generations of non-Catholics. It is not unusual to find that Jesuit or Religious of the Sacred Heart schools enroll students whose parents and grandparents attended those schools, sometimes in another city. These students reflect a level of influence which may outweigh their relatively small number. (In 1979-80 Creighton Prep (Jesuit) enrolled approximately 2% non-Catholic students. This figure has been reasonably persistent for several years.)

The "typical" neighborhood parochial school enrolls a relatively small number of non-Catholic students. Overall average may be estimated at approximately 1% of all students. This number is small for several reasons, among which is the continuing imposition of Admission Guidelines to protect public school enrollments in the face of court-ordered busing. (In 1976 the Omaha Archdiocese Board of Education (CABE) mandated rigorous Admission Guidelines to support the peaceful and orderly implementation of the court order (for mandated busing) in Omaha Public Schools, District 1 (OPS 1). The Admission Guidelines (revised 2-78) continue in effect.)

One may speculate also that these neighborhoods have had attractive public schools so that non-Catholics have not felt the need to seek out alternative schools. In addition, until rather recently, these parochial schools have been filled with their own parishioners.

The key question is:

Why do non-Catholics choose Catholic schools?

I asked this question of many different people. Among these were school administrators, teachers, parents of non-Catholic school children, and one or two Protestant ministers. I have also talked with pastors about these matters. The following describes what I was able to find out.

Almost universally non-Catholic parents who patronize Catholic schools identify the same three reasons for using Catholic schools. The reasons may be phrased somewhat differently but the underlying rationale of these parents is the same:

--the Catholic school is perceived to be a school which "cares" for the child, a school which "respects" him, and which 'treats him like a person;"

--the Catholic school is perceived to be a school which emphasizes solid learning. Black parents especially emphasize that their children "have a chance to go to a 'good college' and thereby "make something" of themselves;"

--the Catholic school is perceived to be a setting in which goodness and moral values are important. Often too, parents cite the models for good behavior presented by priests and religious.

A fourth reason is frequently cited by inner-city parents and by those parents who have withdrawn their children from middle-class neighborhood schools. That is, that these children "had a bad experience" in public school, or that they had "problems."

Are non-Catholic school students and their parents likely to be church-goers, that is, to display behaviors normally associated with religiosity?

The emphasis on "moral values" suggests that these parents want to identify for themselves and for their children a common standard of values. Generally, I have found that these values are best described as the "old American virtues," such as honesty, dependability, etc. Patterns were elusive, but my modest data indicates that non-Catholics enrolled in middle-class or "elite" schools are not very likely to exhibit church-going or other denominational church activities. However, it is not unusual to find devout church-members among Black parents patronizing Catholic schools.

What expectations do Catholic schools establish for non-Catholic students?

Most Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Omaha (or parish where a parish

school) establish some ground rules for student enrollment. These include the payment of some tuition, generally full value for "elite" schools. Tuition required for non-Catholic enrollment in inner-city or changing neighborhood schools, as well as the middle-class parochial school, more often than not, is only a fraction of the per capita cost. However, some schools in the middle-class parishes have begun to charge a rate which approximates average per capita cost, through it should be noted that this in no way accounts for items such as capital expenditures, indebtedness, or value of contributed services.

Most schools expect non-Catholic students to participate in religiously oriented activities, such as all-school liturgies, retreats, etc. Most schools also require attendance in religion classes. Schools also make demands on parents particularly as regards the prior understanding and acceptance of ideals, sanctions and expectations for students. Parents are clearly informed of the purposes of the Catholic school and their need to participate in school matters.

The latter may include not only parent attendance at events such as the parent conference, but also taking on their "share" in volunteering for lunchroom supervision, field trip activities, etc. Non-Catholic parents in one school are the backbone for bingo "working."

In all parish-owned schools the pastor takes an active and informed role in reviewing the admission of the student. He knows of and approves all

non-Catholic enrollments. (In parishes likely to be affected by the Admission Guidelines the pastor also takes an active role in reviewing all the documentation supplied to determine admission status.)

In essence, I feel comfortable with these practices and encourage them. They are signs of a growing maturity in Catholic school administration. In this posture of caring, fidelity to Church purposes and attending to excellence I see many implications for EVANGELIZATION.

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC CATECHETICAL DIRECTORY (Sharing the Light of Faith, United States Catholic Conference, 1979) states that pre-evangelization and evangelization "... are likely to be most successful when they build on basic human needs -- for security, affection, acceptance, growth and intellectual development -- showing these include a need, a hunger, for God and His Word." (pp. 34.)

Digiaccmo notes the religious receptivity of teenagers "is tied closely to childhood religious experiences and to attitudes and practices within the family circle. The religious experiences and to attitudes and practices within the family circle. The religious nature of young children has always been a task calling for genuine parental faith and sensitivity to stages of growth." (James J. Digiaccmo, "Evangelizing the Young," in AMERICA 10-13-79, p. 187.)

It follows then that if the Catholic school is to be true to its real function, then it has all the greater responsibility to serve the non-Catholic child whose parents seek caring, stability, human affection, warmth and solid learning and find this in the Catholic school. So too, it is evident that parental religious commitment, if not to the Catholic faith, then to the ideals of the Catholic school, needs to be vigorously and persistently reinforced.

It is inspiring too, to consider the occasions in which a non-Catholic child asks for Baptism in the Catholic Church. In some ways I wish that these occasions were more frequent: the faith of the believing community needs to show forth much more clearly in its educational settings, especially the Catholic school. ON the other hand, the relative infrequency of Baptisms suggests the great delicacy with which Catholic schools treat the mystery of God's call to join the "community of believers."

I hope that I have not painted too rosy a picture of Catholic schools in their responses to non-Catholics. I have some concerns which may in some schools assume major importance. I note this especially in view of the fact that nearly all areas of the country are experiencing a decline of births. The impact of this on schools, especially those in older neighborhoods of the big city may be very great. Schools need children in order to exist and non-Catholic children form a potentially large "undeveloped" pool for Catholic school recruitment. It will surely be a temptation to seek out "warm bodies" and this purpose must be stifled!

I identify three major concerns or circumstances which may erode the healthy climate in which non-Catholics may be admitted to Catholic schools:

- that Catholic schools exhibit a "waffling" in their clear and unequivocal expression of their function in the educational mission of the Catholic Church;
- that Catholic schools have failed to stimulate parents and other support groups to obtain "special" resources for "special" needs.
- that Catholic school officials do not report out the true value and true cost of Catholic school education, and thus have failed to gain support for private education among minority communities and the larger community.

The school's community, its board and pastor and its teachers and principals must identify clearly and unequivocally the ideals of the school in the perspectives of the educational mission of the Catholic Church. No "shimmy" or "waffling" can intrude in the great task of pre-evangelization or evangelization.

And please, no more schools that attempt to disguise their Catholic base by calling themselves "Christian" or citing the "Judaio-Christian" basis for school goals! If the school is a school owned and operated by the Catholic Church, then it is a Catholic school! Please, no more "closet Catholic" schools!

We can and should join with other denominations in the celebration of our faith in Jesus as the "Christ" of revelation. But to intimate that there is no historical difference among Baptist, Methodist, Lutherans, etc. and Catholic is to be either naive or dishonest.

The school's ideals must show forth clearly the educational mission of the Catholic Church, not in triflism but in a vitality in its ministerial presence and effect. A Catholic school community must be willing to say, "Come and join us... we work toward quality Catholic education." This is greatly to be valued, and our school expresses our values." This is a school which witnesses to the mandate of the Church to reach in the name of Jesus and to proclaim the Good News to all peoples!

Catholic Schools need to serve the "poor," The "handicapped," the child of single-parent family, indeed, all these children who especially need the love and care which must be the hallmark of the Catholic School. The doors of the school must be open. Yet, essentially, Catholic Schools have been operated on a "parent pay" or parish pay system. This is not enough! An aggressive, positive campaign of development must be launched to seek out all available resources for our "special" children and their needs.

Handicapped students alone should be served explicitly through P. L. 94-142. But they are not now! A bare trickle of federal and state services finds its way to private school children. What is lacking is solid, aggressive parental lobbying. And perhaps the non-Catholic parent, with

no formal ties to church structures is the person most likely to obtain such services for all students.

All children should have the right for quality education in the private sector. That this education is under Church auspices should not negate that right. And frankly, I believe it is time that every parent stand up for his rights to educate a child in a school of his choice without being penalized for reasons which are purported to be "contrary to the 'wall of separation' of Church and State." The interpretation of this phrase (originally found in a letter of Jefferson to Madison, not a court document) current is an invention of 20th century bigots to limit and constrain the private sector in elementary and secondary schools.

Cries of "white flight" cannot become a smoke screen behind which benefits due all children are limited to public school enrollees.

Nor can "white flight" be attached forever to the right of the Catholic school to seek out and serve non-Catholic students of middle-class families. Sound policy, solid school purposes, and realistic appraisal of applicants and efforts to recruit minorities should safeguard admission of non-Catholics to Catholic schools.

I noted that Catholic school officials are shy in telling the public about the achievement of students in these schools. So too, Catholic schools, especially those in inner-city or changing neighborhoods, as well as those

in the more typical "middle-class" schools, need to overcome their shyness and calmly recite the FACTS of Catholic school income and costs.

Catholic schools must learn how to encourage non-Catholic parents and other members of the community to invest in Catholic schools because these schools are faithful to their Church goals and faithful to goals of providing quality educational opportunities.

I see this as a special necessity for minority parents. It would appear that the greatest single resource for a Black, inner-city parent is the local Catholic school!

What is it worth for non-Catholic Black parent to know that his child has learned to read in a Catholic school? (Statistically speaking, this is contrary to all national "norms.") Minority parents must insist that minority leadership contribute its just share of moral and financial support to private institutions. What is excellence to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People? To Black business and professional leaders? Where are you, Urban League when Catholic schools providing quality education to Black students need you?

And so, I see that in cities and small towns, in affluent suburbs, in changing neighborhoods and in the inner city the Catholic school must clearly and explicitly invite all children to "come and see" and let every American know that the Catholic community believes in its own faith and

values, and yet holds most dear (perhaps as a result of faith and values) the right of each person for a quality education in a private, Catholic school. We believe in OPTIONS for parents. We believe that is our right and parent right! We also believe that students ought to have options for quality education.

The school's program must set firm and high expectations for students. Student-teacher interaction must emphasize positive support, firm demands and willingness of both teacher and student to work toward defined goals. The gifted, the handicapped, the majority and minority child must all have a place in this school.

This then is the caring, the values and the growth to which we are called to as Catholic educators and which in a unique and mysterious way opens minds and hearts to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Catholic schools will move into the last decades of the 20th century with new goals for their own excellence. Among these goals should be that of infusing new vitality into all of American education by opening up quality Catholic Schools to Non-Catholics.

Catholic schools can attract and hold non-Catholics for reasons entirely legitimate and educationally sound. What is important is that Catholic schools continue to be faithful to their own ideals, that is, in carrying

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Non-Catholics in Catholic Schools...

out the educational mission of the Catholic Church. Surely this is
Evangelization!

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